

What Sparked Your Interest in Orchids?

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Can a spark be put down to one thing? Can a spark, a single spark, be responsible for determining a passion, which may seem lifelong, and innate, rather than learned, lived and loved? Now, if someone wrote that their passion was sparked by the smell of horse manure in a greenhouse, you would probably consider them ready for some sort of care regime. But, that was definitely one of the sparks on a journey to what seems like a forever-interest in orchids. There were individual, single sparks, ones not recognised at the time, but when combined they created a big cracker of a spark.

The first spark was one that occurred when, as a child, walking in the bush and looking at those pretty flowers, just made me want to go back again and have another look. Who, at such a young and tender age, knew they were orchids, because at the time they were just pretty flowers in the bush? The second spark was definitely the smell of horse manure in the greenhouse. Then the next, and maybe the final spark, was meeting that someone, that special someone who was so passionate and knowledgeable about all sorts of orchids you could not help but get dragged into that world. That meeting proved to be infectious. Infectious to the point where the spark grew to a flame; and there was absolutely no turning back!

I begin at the beginning, when I was a child (and that was a while ago now). I lived on a farm in northern Tasmania. There I had plenty of opportunity to go wandering around into the bush, either for a walk to escape the siblings (or the parents); finding those stray animals who should not have been there; riding the horse or just taking a quiet walk with the dogs. It never really mattered why one went into the bush, you just did, and it was always fun. At that young and impressionable age there was always something to see; always something to do; and always something to remember.

The first memory I have of those pretty flowers in the bush (which eventually turned out to be native orchids) was the short, fat, red flower with low leaves. It turns out they were *Corybas* species, the helmet orchids. However, at the time I just remembered thinking why were the stems not longer, so I could pick them and take them home to surprise Mum? There were plenty of others as well: abundant greenhoods, the donkey orchids and the sun orchids. They were nice colours: purples, yellows, greens and blues; and they were all very pretty. Some of them had long stems too, so you know where they ended up. The other thing I remember about those orchids is that they came back and flowered in the same place almost every year, and at around the same time. Over the years I got to see the same flowers on a regular basis. Sometimes you just had to go

back to that rock ledge and look to see if those yellow flowers were still there in the same place.

Was this the spark for my interest in orchids? I'm not sure, but looking back I know I thought the flowers were pretty. Finding the first photograph and description of one in a book certainly made me keep looking at, and, for them. The other memory about that first description in a book I ever read about orchids, was how on earth did you pronounce those names – let alone spell or write them down? I mean, who can just drop the names *Calochilus platychilus* or *Diuris pardina* into an everyday conversation with one's siblings or friends? It was much easier to talk about the green flower with the beard, or the yellow one with the leopard spots. Even those descriptions did not incite anyone I knew into any sort of positive action or spark any sort of interest?

Unfortunately, once I moved away from the farm to work and eventually marry, that interest was on hold for a while – a flickering spark maybe? Other priorities just seemed to take over for a bit.

Now, the smell of horse manure in the greenhouse was the next spark, I consider crucial on the journey to passion and a genuine interest in orchids. My uncle, who lived in the north-east of Tasmania, had a greenhouse full of orchids: cymbidiums, all of them. His favourite was *Cymbidium* California Cascade. I still have the original plant to this day. That horse manure smell, well, that was there because that is what he grew his cymbidiums in – just horse manure. Not orchid bark out of a bag from the local nursery. The horse manure was wet, heavy in the pots and smelly! But the flowers were magnificent; and the leaves were so very green and long. At flowering time, those plants were truly spectacular.

My uncle, due to declining health, had decided to get out of orchids. Did I want them? Did I ever! Was this another spark, or was I just keen to take on the collection so he did not have to worry about them? It also meant that when he came to visit he could see his orchids again. Mind you, before he let me relocate them, I had to have a greenhouse and a watering system in place because they *needed lots of water and the cold weather and frost would kill the plants*. That was about all I knew about cymbidium orchids at the time – they did not like the frost and they needed plenty of water. No matter how interested in the spark, I had a lot to learn. My dad, my husband and his friend knew even less, but they got to learn about those orchids pretty quickly as well. They had to build the greenhouse – yesterday, of course! I do not think they were interested in that spark, but my interest was indeed growing at that stage.

That seems such a long time ago. If I am being honest here, it was. From those first cymbidiums there came a reinvigorated interest in the local bush native orchids and other species – the ones that did not require horse manure. What could I get to grow? How many flowers would one plant produce? More importantly, did I need a bigger

greenhouse? Eventually, the spark grew a little bigger and I learned some of those correct pronunciations. I still cannot use them in every day conversation. Of course I purchased those reference books which now adorn enough bookshelves in our house to be considered a library. This spark was becoming expensive by now, so, I think I was hooked!

The final spark for me was meeting someone who finally turned that little spark into a full on fire and brimstone experience. There was someone who was knowledgeable, passionate and has a genuine interest in all things orchids. Someone whose enthusiasm was palpable and infectious. Someone who was so generous with handing on any sort of helpful information. This advice and the love of plants, all things orchid and advice just kept on coming (and still does). We can all be thankful for running into someone on our journey that turns a spark into a large flame - you can never go back.

That single spark and an interest in orchids has produced many other benefits. Friendships have been made; plants have been swapped; information and knowledge have been gained; and there is always, always something else to be learned. I still have that one secret. You know, the one passed on by my uncle that no one else knows, that keeps the interest going. But thankfully, the spark began, and for whatever reason it will never go out - not in this lifetime anyway. There is always another lesson to be learned.